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THE WORKMANSHIP OF "MACBETH"

BY SIR ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

I PROPOSE in this and a following paper to consider Shakespeare's "Macbeth" as a piece of workmanship. There are, of course, many other aspects in which it should be studied. We may seek, for example, to fix its date and place in the chronological order of Shakespeare's writings; but this has been done for us, pretty nearly. Or we may search it for new light upon the author himself and his history—a pursuit which has always seemed to me rather curious than important. All literature, to be sure, must be personal: yet the artist—the great artist—dies into his work and in that survives: and, all said and done, it is the work that matters—though the shutters be up at The Mermaid, Macbeth is Macbeth.

Brave lads in olden musical centuries
Sang, night by night, adorable choruses,
Sat late by alehouse doors in April,
Chaunting in joy as the moon was rising.

Now these, the songs, remain to eternity;
Those, only those, the bountiful choristers
Gone—

Of the very greatest we know little more than Homer left to the women of Delos, saying, "Farewell to you all, and remember me in the time to come; and when any man a stranger from afar shall inquire of you, 'O maidens, who is the sweetest of minstrels hereabouts, and whom do you most delight?' Then make answer to him modestly, 'Sir, it is a blind man, and he lives in steep Chios.'"

A general criticism of "Macbeth" I shall not attempt, because he would be rash indeed who sought to improve upon what Dr. Bradley has recently done in his *Lectures on*

Shakespearian Tragedy, a book which I hold to belong to the first order of criticism, and to be a true ornament of our age. None the less, it seems to me to leave some room for what I shall here discuss—the technical difficulties of the play and how Shakespeare surmounted them; and I do this the more hardily, being convinced that literature, being alive to-day as ever, and the task of excelling none the less constant because particular difficulties change—that criticism is most helpful which, separating the incidental difficulty from the imminent, can show how a great master of his art overcame one or the other, or both.

I take "Macbeth" as a work of art eminently suitable for this purpose: large in conception, conveniently (for our purpose) simple and complete in design; by common consent producing a great and intended effect on the mind. It is the shortest of Shakespeare's plays save only "The Comedy of Errors." Its tale is told in just under two thousand lines—about half the length of "Hamlet." This means no blame upon "Hamlet"—which, turning upon indecision in its chief character, is naturally long: but it goes all to "Macbeth's" credit. Of two plots equal in dignity, the simpler will be the better, and the half of writing consists in making one word better than two.

Now, to start with the rudiments, what had Shakespeare to do? He, a tried and competent playwright, had to make a play: a play to be acted, to succeed on the boards, to entertain, for three hours or so,¹ an audience which had paid money to be entertained. This differentiates it at once from a literary composition meant to be read by the fireside, where the kettle does all the hissing.

I am aware, to be sure, that certain scholars and critics object to our considering any dramatic masterpiece in its primary theatrical intention, or object, at any rate, to our laying stress on this. To name two, who can only be named with respect, Dr. Courthope holds that "the crucial test of a play's quality is only applied when it is read," while Dr. Spingarn, of Columbia University, protested with great vigor recently² against the doctrine—invented, he thinks, by Castelvetro—that,

¹ In the Prologue to "Romeo and Juliet" Shakespeare talks of "the two hours' traffic of our stage." But the actual performance must have taken longer than that.

² "A Note on Dramatic Criticism." By J. E. Spingarn. Read before the English Association, Oxford.

The fact that the drama is intended for the stage, that it is to be acted, must form the basis of every true theory of tragedy or comedy.

I hope in two ways to disentangle my paper from this general discussion and yet make it serve its purpose: (1) by setting its claim low and contending only that, be Drs. Courthope and Spingarn right or wrong, there may be some use in considering "Macbeth" as a play written for presentation on the stage; (2) by not pretending for the nonce to be wiser than Shakespeare, who certainly wrote his plays to be acted, and on all the evidence was careless, as culpably as you will, of what happened to them afterwards. In short, if we wish to understand what Shakespeare as a workman was driving at, we must get even the First Folio out of our minds and in imagination seat ourselves amid the audience for which he wrote.

The interior of an Elizabethan theater—say of the Globe Theater, Southwark—has been reconstructed for us in so many treatises that it will be enough here to mention briefly some half a dozen conditions, unfamiliar to us, under which "Macbeth" would be presented.

(1) The stage, raised pretty much as it is nowadays, ran out for some way into the auditorium.

(2) The audience returned the compliment by overflowing the stage. Stools, ranged along either side of it, were much in demand by young men of fashion who wished to show off their fine clothes.

Here already are two conditions, now obsolete, with which Shakespeare had to lay his account; nor are they unimportant. In the first place, as Sir Walter Raleigh has pointed out, on a stage thus constructed and with an audience thus disposed, the groups of players were seen from many points of view, and had to aim at statuesque rather than pictorial effect. Further, the patrons lining the stage smoked—or, as they put it, drank—tobacco in clay pipes; so that the atmosphere, one suspects, was as a rule free and easy, not much unlike that of the old music-halls frequented by some of us in graceless youth, where a corpulent chairman ordered drinks, for which, if privileged to sit beside him you subsequently paid; where all joined companionably in the chorus and a wink from the singer would travel around four-fifths of a circle. We have only to glance at "The Knight of the Burning Pestle" to understand how frank was this commerce between actors and spectators and how it could be

turned to account for a purpose of comedy. Will it be thought fanciful if I suggest that in tragedy, where the tendency to light interjections would be overawed and overcome, this arrangement of the Elizabethan stage gave part of the audience, at any rate, a sense of being in the drama—for example, of being actually within the castle of Inverness when that fatal knocking beat on the gate?

(3) The Elizabethan stage, as every one knows, had no painted scenery. At the back of it, at some little height above the heads of the players, a narrow gallery or platform projected, with a small door behind it and a practicable ladder, to give access to it or be removed, as occasion demanded. Fix the ladder and it became the stairway leading to Duncan's sleeping-chamber; take it away, and the gallery became the battlements of Dunsinane or of Flint Castle, or the royal box above Coventry lists, or Juliet's balcony, or Brabantio's window, or Jessica's from which she drops the coffer, or Cleopatra's up to which she hales dying Antony. From the floor of this gallery to the floor of the stage depended draperies which, as they were drawn close or opened, gave you the arras behind which Falstaff was discovered in slumber or Polonius stabbed, the tomb of Juliet, Desdemona's bed, the stage for the play-scene in "Hamlet," the cave of Prospero, or of Imogen, or of Hecate. To right and left of this draped alcove were two doors giving on the back and the green-rooms—*mimorum ædes*—for the entrances and exits of the players.

(4) The central area of the auditorium was unroofed. This meant—the fashionable time for the theater being the afternoon—that the action, or a part of it, usually took place by daylight. When daylight waned, lanterns were called in; and it may be that if we could tabulate the times of year at which Shakespeare's several plays were first presented we should find that, among other conditions, he worked with an eye on the almanac. But I lay little stress on this; because, of all stage effects, darkness is the most easily contrived. It involves no more trouble than the closing of a shutter; it may well be that Shakespeare, as a stage-manager, had means of employing darkness at will, say by a blind drawn out from the proscenium or above it. I merely note here (*a*) that one first account of "Macbeth" by a spectator is that of one Dr. Forman, an astrologer, who paid for his seat in the Globe

Theater, on Saturday, April 20, 1610, that is at a time of year when the sky over the theater would be daylight; (b) that "Macbeth," opening in the murk light of the Scottish highlands, quickly turns to darkness; and (c) that the sense of darkness habitually used by Shakespeare in his tragedies is, as we shall presently see, necessary in "Macbeth" more than in any other.

(5) The lack of scenic background had, by Shakespeare as by all the Elizabethans, to be supplied by imaginative speech. By this only could the beauty of a spot or the mystery of an hour be suggested. By so much as modern scenic resources, definite or vague, have improved on the Elizabethan, the description or adumbration of either in words has become superfluous and inartistic. Nor is this the less certain for our regretting it.

(6) To these conditions must be added (for symmetry only) the best known of all. On the Elizabethan stage the part of Lady Macbeth was played by a boy. If we reflect on this and on such a passage as—

I have given suck; and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn, as you
Have done to this.

If we consider that Shakespeare dared to make boys talk in this fashion, it should teach us, who believe it important to study the conditions of the stage for which he wrote, to beware of riding one hobby too hard; to remind ourselves that in this matter of "boy-actresses," for example, he dared to ignore, and by ignoring triumphed over, what to most of us would seem a hopeless disability.

It were pedantic, in short, to be always visualizing that old theater on the Bankside when reading our Shakespeare; or when seeing him acted to be perpetually murmuring, "He did not write it for *this*." He did not, to be sure; but so potent was his genius that it has carried his work past the conditions of his own age to live perennially in later times and under new conditions, even as the *Iliad* has survived the harp and the feast. This adaptable vitality is the test of first-rate genius; and, save Shakespeare's, few dramas even of the great Elizabethan age have passed it. As for Shake-

speare, I firmly believe that, could his large masculine spirit revisit London, it would, whatever the dilettante or the superior person may say, rejoice in what has been done to amplify and improve that cage against which we have his own word that he fretted, and would be proud of the pains his countrymen still take after three centuries to interpret him worthily; and this although I seem to catch, together with a faint smell of brimstone, his comments upon the actor-manager of these days with the limelight dogging him about the stage and analyzing the rainbow upon his glittering eye. None the less it is useful to remember that Shakespeare could not foresee our modern stage with its machinery; that while much has been improved, something has been lost; that he was, as a fact, careless about his plays after they had served their first purpose; and that we must seek back to the limitations of his theater before we can thoroughly understand what a workman he was.

I pass now from the conditions under which he built his plays to the material out of which he built this particular one.

The material for "Macbeth" will be found in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland*, first published in 1578 (but Shakespeare seems to have used the second edition, of 1587). It lies scattered about in the separate "chronicles" of King Duncan, King Duff, King Kenneth, King Macduff; but we get the pith of it in two passages from the "Chronicle of King Duncan":

Shortly after happened a strange and uncouth wonder . . . it fortunes as Makbeth and Banquho journeyed toward Fores, where the king did then lay, they went sporting by the way together without other companie save only themselves, passing through the woodes and fieldes, when sodenly, in the middes of a launde, there met them 3 women in strange and ferly apparell, resembling creatures of an elder worlde; whom they attentively behelde, wondering much at the sight.

Then follow the prophecies. "All hayle, Makbeth, Thane of Glamis," etc., with the promise to Banquho that "contrarily thou in deede shall not reigne at all, but of thee shall be borne which shall governe the Scottish Kingdome by long order of continuall descent."

We need not pause on this; but it gives a reason, if a secondary one, why the story should attract Shakespeare. For James VI. of Scotland, a descendant of Banquho, had come to be James I. of England. Actors and playwrights

have ever an eye for "topical" opportunity, and value it none the less if it flatters a reigning house.

The same night at supper Banquho jested with him and sayde, Nowe, Makbeth, thou has obtayned those things which the two former sisters prophesied, there remayneth onely for thee to purchase that the thyrd sayd should come to pass. Whereupon Makbeth, revolving the thing in his mind even then, began to devise how he mighte attayne to the kingdome.

Next we read that Duncan, by advancing his young son Malcolm to be Prince of Cumberland, "as it were thereby to appoint him successor to his kingdome," sorely troubled Macbeth's ambition, "insomuch that he now began to think of usurping the kingdome by force."

The wordes of these three weird sisters (of whome before ye have heard) greatly encouraged him hereunto, but specially his wife lay sore upon him to attempt the thing, as she was very ambitious, brenning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a Queene. At length, therefore, communicating his proposed intent with his trustie friendes, amongst whom Banquho was the chiefest, upon confidence of their promised ayde he slewe the King at Envernes (or, as some say, at Botgosuane) in the vi year of his reygne.

The "Chronicle" goes on to tell how Makbeth was crowned at Scone; how he reigned for seventeen years; how he got rid of Banquho; how Banquho's son escaped; how Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane, with much more that is handled in the tragedy. The story (so far as we are concerned with it) ends as the play ends.

But Makduffe . . . answered (with his naked sworde in his hande) saying, It is true, Makbeth, and now shall thine insatiable cruelties have an ende, for I am even he that thy wysards have tolde thee of, who was never borne of my mother, but ripped out of her wombe. There withall he stept unto him, and slue him in the place. Then cutting his heade from the shoulders, he set it upon a poll and brought it into Malcolme. This was the ende of Makbeth, after he had reigned xvii years over the Scottishmen. In the beginning of his raigne he accomplished many worthie actes, right profitable to the common wealth (as ye have heard), but afterwards, by *illusion of the Divell*, he defamed the same with most terrible crueltie.

There in sum we have Shakespeare's material; and patently it holds one element on which the mind of an artist (if I understand by ever so little) would seize at once and instinctively. I mean the element of the supernatural. It is the element which every commentator, almost every critic, has done his best to belittle. I propose to show that to Shakespeare, as a workman, it was of the first importance.

Let us start by considering the "Chronicle"—that is to say, his material—with this supernatural element left out; and what have we? We have left to us an ordinary sordid story of a disloyal general assassinating his king, usurping the throne, reigning with cruelty for seventeen years, and perishing at length to the relief of every one. Had Zimri peace, who slew his master? Well, if we confine ourselves to the "Chronicle," yes he had, and for seventeen years; which, for a bloody tyrant is no short run. But if, confining ourselves to the "Chronicle," we exclude supernatural with its possibilities, the story as a theme of tragedy has one fatal defect. Tragedy demands that we sympathize with the fortunes of its hero; but where is there room for sympathy in the fortunes of a disloyal, self-seeking murderer?

Just there—as I will try to show—lay Shakespeare's capital difficulty.

Let us be quite clear about that difficulty, its magnitude and importance. "Tragedy," says Aristotle, "is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain qualities of both character and thought. It is these that determine the qualities of actions themselves; these—thought and character—are the two natural causes from which actions spring, on these causes, again, all success or failure depends."¹

It comes to this—the success of your tragedy depends on what sort of persons you represent; and principally, of course, on what sort of person you make your chief tragic figure, or protagonist, or hero. And for this hero and what should happen to him Aristotle proceeds, in the thirteenth chapter of the *Poetics*, to lay down a number of rules, which may be summarized thus:

(1) A tragedy must not present to us the spectacle of a perfectly good man brought from prosperity to adversity. For that merely shocks us.

(2) Neither must it present that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity. For that is not tragedy at all, but the perversion of tragedy, and revolts the moral sense.

(3) Nor, again, should it exhibit the downfall of a merely bad man. For the business of tragedy being with pity and

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, vi, 5. I quote Butcher's reading, which gives the sense clearly enough, though actually Aristotle's language is simpler and terser, and for "thought" I should substitute "understanding" as a translation of *διάνοια*.

terror—pity is aroused by undeserved misfortune, terror by misfortune befalling a man like ourselves.

(4) There remains, then, as the only proper subject for tragedy, the spectacle of a man not surpassingly good or just, who is brought to disaster not by sheer depravity, but by some error or frailty—in other words, a man like you or me betrayed by a weakness to which you or I can conceive ourselves liable.

(5) Lastly, says Aristotle, this man should differ from you and me in being highly renowned and prosperous—an Oedipus, a Thyestes, or some other illustrious person.

Now before examining these rules I should enter two warnings. In the first place, although Aristotle lays them down dogmatically enough, they are not really rules at all, but brilliant inductions derived by him from the Attic tragedies with which he happened to be acquainted. He was not teaching the young dramatist how to write, nor have we any ground for supposing that, had he lived to see any tragedy which broke any one of his rules with success, he would have hesitated to own himself mistaken. Take, for example, Rule 5. It is obviously less philosophical than the rest, and indeed little more than a counsel of theatrical expediency. Dr. Bradley, indeed, would seem to press it further when he remarks that

The pangs of despised love and the anguish of remorse, we say, are the same in a peasant and a prince: but (not to insist that they cannot be so when the prince is really a prince) the story of the prince, the triumvir, or the general, has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence—perhaps the caprice—of fortune or fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival.

This is well said, and Aristotle, to be sure, may have had something of the sort in his mind. But the Greek tragedians, on whose plays he was generalizing, chose their heroes among the illustrious for two more practical reasons: the one, that they had to follow a semi-religious tradition; the other, that, as mere matter of theatrical effect, downfall from a high eminence is more spectacular than downfall from a low one, and produces a more evident shock. Bearing this in mind, we need be in no haste to listen to those who adduce to us Shakespeare's constant selection of kings and princes for his *dramatis personæ* as evidence that he was a snob. One

might almost as easily prove it snobbish in a Greek tragedian to write of Cadmus and Harmonia because

The gods had to their marriage come,
And at the banquet all the Muses sang;

or (if the reader prefers it) the wedding presents were numerous and costly.

It is usually a mistake to read base motives into what a man does when it can be more economically shown to proceed from a decent attention to business. As for Aristotle, we shall perhaps do his memory no disrespect by surmising that, were he alive to be asked his opinion on *Le Père Goriot* or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as themes for tragedy, he were a man of mind large enough to reconsider what he wrote¹ more than two thousand years ago.

For the second warning, we have no evidence that Shakespeare had ever heard of Aristotle's *Poetics*; but, rather, good ground for supposing that he had not. If, then, never having heard of them, our greatest playwright instinctively obeyed those main rules, the more credit must go to Aristotle for extracting from what an Æschylus or a Sophocles had done these rules which a Shakespeare, albeit unconsciously, must follow.

Omitting Rule 5, then, and considering the more essential Rules 1-4, we note at once that the first three of these are negative and do but prepare the way for Rule 4, which works down to this—that a hero of tragic drama must, whatever else he misses, engage our sympathy; that, however gross his error or grievous his frailty, it must not exclude our sense of his being a like man with ourselves; that, sitting in the audience, you and I must accept what befalls him as conceivably befalling us, and say in our hearts, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

We can fetch this point home to ourselves out of any scene in "Macbeth." For an instance—when the ghost of Banquo seats itself at that dreadful supper, who sees it? Not the guest on the stage—not even the Queen—but only Macbeth and you and I. Whom does it accuse? Macbeth. Of what does it accuse him? Of something which he, and you, and I, are hiding in our own breasts.

But how has Shakespeare managed it? If we trust to the "Chronicle," Macbeth was a murderer, and a murderer for

¹ And in his youth, perhaps. There are reasons for conjecturing that *Poetics* to be an early work.

his own private profit—a combination scarcely calculated to unlock your breast or mine and not at all calculated, I hope, to strike home upon our private frailties.

The “ Chronicle ” does indeed allow just one loophole for pardon. It hints that Duncan, nominating his boy to succeed him, thereby disappointing Macbeth’s reasonable hope of the crown, which he thereupon, and not until then, by process of murder usurped, “ having a juste quarrell so to do as he took the matter.”

Did Shakespeare use that hint, enlarge that loophole? He did not; and the more we study it the more we must admire the splendid audacity of what he did. Instead of grasping a petty chance to condone Macbeth’s guilt, he seized on it and plunged it threefold deeper, so that it might verily “ the multitudinous seas incarnadine.”

He made this man, a sworn soldier, murder Duncan, his liege lord.

He made this man, a host, murder Duncan, a guest within his gates.

He made this man, strong and hale, murder Duncan, old, enfeebled, defenseless.

He made this man murder Duncan for nothing nobler than private advancement.

He made this man murder Duncan, who had trusted and promoted him, and, that no detail of reproach might be lacking, had, a short while before, sent in most kindly thought the gift of a diamond to his hostess.

To sum up, instead of extenuating Macbeth’s villainy, Shakespeare doubles and redoubles it. Deliberately this magnificent artist locks every apparent door upon condonation, plunges the guilt of his hero deep as hell—and then, standing back, tucks up his sleeves.

How can we be made to sympathize with such a man? To feel that he is such as we? Why, his guilt is of the very stuff which in “ Hamlet ” outlaws the criminal beyond reach of pardon—beyond our pardon, almost beyond God’s.

“ Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole—” So did Macbeth upon Duncan’s. Hear, in “ Hamlet,” the wretch on his knees—

Forgive me my foul murder?

That cannot be; since I am still possess’d

Of those effects for which I did the murder.

So was Macbeth again. Yet it is for this man that we

must be made to feel pity and terror, not for the deed, not for Duncan, or not chiefly for these, but for Macbeth, the protagonist. How was Shakespeare to do it?

He could, by giving him magnificent poetry to utter, make us feel that, for all his guilt, Macbeth was somehow a great man; and this he did. He could conciliate our sympathy at the start by presenting him as a brave and victorious soldier; and this he did. He could trace the dreadful act to ambition, "last infirmity of noble minds"; and this he did. He could show him drawn to the deed against will and conscience by persuasion of another, and that other (as the "Chronicle" hinted) a woman; and this again, though it is extremely dangerous, since all submission of will means some forfeit of manliness, lying apparently on the side of cowardice, and ever so little of cowardice may suffice to kill sympathy, this again Shakespeare dared and did. He used all these artifices. But they remain artifices. They do not begin to surmount the main difficulty, of carrying our sympathy past a crime at which human nature revolts.

There is, I conceive, only one possible way: that of making your hero—supposed virtuous, supposed valiant, supposed of certain winning qualities of nature—proceed to his crime under some fatal hallucination. It must not be an hallucination of mere madness; for that merely shocks and puzzles. In our treatment of madmen we have come to be far tenderer than were the Elizabethans. Still, the effects of madness remain unnatural, unaccountable: it is a human breakdown out of which anything inhuman may happen. No, the dreadful mistake must be one that can seize on a mind yet powerful and lead it logically to a doom that we, seated in the audience, understand and awfully forebode, yet cannot arrest.

Further, such an hallucination once established upon a strong mind, the more forcibly that mind operates the more desperate will be the conclusion of its error; the more powerful the deluded will the more desperate the deed to which it drives, as with the more anguish we must follow the once noble soul step by step to its ruin.

Now, of all forms of human error, which is the most fatal? Surely that of mistaking unrighteousness for righteousness, of assigning the soul to Satan's terrible resolve, "Evil, be thou my good." By a noble soul such a resolve cannot be taken save it obeys some overmastering delusion. If Shake-

speare could find such a delusion, to fasten it upon Macbeth, he had the key to unlock his main difficulty.

What is witchcraft? Or, first let us ask, what *was* witchcraft?

Well, to begin with, it was something in which the mass of any given audience in the Globe Theater devoutly believed. I shall not here inquire if Shakespeare believed in it, or, if at all, how far; but if he did not believe in it to some extent when he wrote the First Part of *King Henry VI.*, then it adds—what we would thankfully spare—one abomination the more to his treatment of Joan of Arc.

Women were burned for witches in Shakespeare's time, and throughout the seventeenth century and some way on into the eighteenth. We may read in the pious, detestable words of Cotton and Increase Mather what these poor creatures suffered in New England at the hands of the Puritan Fathers; or in Sinclair's *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* more than any Christian should bargain for concerning our home-grown beldames, especially those of Scotland. To go right back to Shakespeare's time, we may study its prevalent, almost general, belief in Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584). To the Elizabethans witchcraft was an accepted thing. Their drama reeks of it. I need but to cite a few titles—Marlowe's "Faustus," Greene's "Friar Bacon," Middleton's "Witch," Dekker's "Witch of Edmonton."

Nor shall I labor this, because it has been seized on by Dr. Johnson with his usual straight insight and expounded with his usual common sense. This play of "Macbeth" peculiarly attracted him. In 1745, long before he annotated the complete Shakespeare, he put forth a pamphlet entitled *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth, with Remarks on Sir T. H.'s* (Sir Thomas Hanmer's) *Edition of Shakespeare*. To that pamphlet (says Boswell) he affixed proposals for a new edition of his own; and though no copy survives which contains them, he had certainly advertised his intention somehow and somewhere. As all the world knows, twenty years elapsed before, in October, 1765, his constitutional lethargy at length overcome, there appeared his edition of Shakespeare, in eight volumes.

Now what has Johnson to tell us of this his favorite play?

He begins on Act I, scene i, line 1—nay, before it: on the stage direction, "Enter Three Witches." Says he:

In order to make a true estimate of the abilities and merits of a writer, it is always necessary to examine the spirit of his age and the opinions of his contemporaries. A poet who should now make the whole action of his tragedy depend upon enchantment, and produce the chief events by the assistance of supernatural spirits, would be censored as transgressing the bounds of probability, be banished from the Theater to the nursery, and condemned to write fairy-tales instead of tragedies.

Here I submit that Johnson talks too loudly. I may not actually believe in Jove or Apollo or Venus, "mother of the Æneid race divine," any more than I believe in Puck or in Oberon, or in ghosts as vulgarly conceived. Yet Jove, Apollo, and Venus remain for me symbols of things in which I do firmly and even passionately believe: of things for which neither Christian doctrine nor modern Natural Science provides me with symbols that are equivalent or even begin to be comparable. Tradition has consecrated them; and an author to-day may invoke these names of gods once authentic; as an author to-day may employ ghosts, fairies, even witches, to convey a spiritual truth, without being suspected, by any one not a fool, of literal belief in his machinery.

Johnson proceeds:

But a survey of the notions that prevailed at the time when this play was written, will prove that Shakespeare was in no danger of such censors, since we only turned the system that was then universal to his advantage, and was far from overburthening the credulity of his audience.

Some learned observations follow on the dark ages and their credence in witchcraft; among which is introduced a story from Olympiodorus, of a wizard, one Libanius, who promised the Empress Placidia to defeat her enemies without aid of soldiery, and was promptly on his promise put to death by that strong-minded lady, "who," adds Johnson, "shewed some kindness in her anger, by cutting him off at a time so convenient for his reputation."

He continues:

The Reformation did not immediately arrive at its meridian, and tho' day was gradually increasing upon us, the goblins of witchcraft still continued to hover in the twilight. In the time of Queen Elizabeth was the remarkable trial of the witches of Warbois, whose conviction is still commemorated in an annual sermon at Huntingdon. But in the reign of King James, in which this tragedy was written, many circumstances concurred to propagate and confirm this opinion. The King, who was much celebrated for his knowledge, had, before his arrival in England, not only examined in person a woman accused of witchcraft, but had given a very

formal account of the practices and illusions of evil spirits, the compacts of witches, the ceremonies used by them, the manner of detecting them, and the justice of punishing them, in his *Dialogues of Dæmonologie*, written in the Scottish dialect, and published at Edinburgh. This book was, soon after his accession, reprinted at London, and as the ready way to gain King James's favor was to flatter his speculations, the system of *Dæmonologie* was immediately adopted by all who desired either to gain preferment or not to lose it. Thus the doctrine of witchcraft was very powerfully inculcated; and as the greatest part of mankind have no other reason for their opinions than that they are in fashion, it cannot be doubted but this persuasion made a rapid progress, since vanity and credulity co-operated in its favor. The infection soon reached the parliament, who, in the first year of King James, made a law by which it was enacted, chap. xii, that "if any person shall use any invocation or conjuration of any evil or wicked spirit; 2, or shall consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil or cursed spirit to or for any intent or purpose; 3, or take up any dead man, woman, or child out of the grave—or the skin, bone, or any part of the dead person—to be employed or used in any manner of witchcraft, sorcery, charm, or enchantment; 4, or shall use, practise, or exercise any sort of witchcraft, sorcery, charm, or enchantment; 5, whereby any person shall be destroyed, killed, wasted, consumed, pined, or lamed in any part of the body; 6, that every such person being convicted shall suffer death." This law was repealed in our own time.

Thus, in the time of Shakespeare, was the doctrine of witchcraft at once established by law and by the fashion, and it became not only unpolite, but criminal, to doubt it.

Upon this general infatuation Shakespeare might be easily allowed to found a play, especially since he has followed with great exactness such histories as were then thought true; nor can it be doubted that the scenes of enchantment, however they may now be ridiculed, were both by himself and his audience thought awful and affecting.

Thus wrote Johnson in the middle of the eighteenth century, "the age of reason"; and, assuming that he talks sense, let us revert to the question, What is, or was, witchcraft? What did men hold it, essentially and precisely, to mean?

It meant, essentially and precisely, that the person who embraced witchcraft sold his soul to the devil, to become his servitor; that for a price he consented to say, "Satan, be thou my god." It meant this and nothing short of this.

In the library of Trinity College, Cambridge, is preserved a paper on which Milton, excogitating subjects for the poem which was to be his *magnum opus*, has left evidence in his own script that he once thought of rewriting this story of Macbeth. The entry runs: "Macbeth, beginning at the arrival of Malcolm at Macduff. The matter of Duncan may be expressed by the appearing of his ghost."

Milton, as everybody knows, profoundly admired Shakespeare; and the story of Macbeth attracted him, as we have seen it afterwards attracted Johnson. I think it must attract every masculine mind that loves literature.

Milton never handled the subject of "Macbeth." Eventually he chose to write an epic on the Fall of Man; and of that poem critics have been found to assert that Satan, "enemy of mankind," is in fact the hero and the personage who claims most of our sympathy.

I suggest that if we turn to *Paradise Lost*, and open it at Book IV upon Satan's soliloquy (32-113), we may catch a hint of what Milton perceived to be the secret of "Macbeth" and made the key of his own great poem. . . .

Farewell, remorse! All good to me is lost:
Evil, be thou my good.

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH.

(*To be concluded.*)